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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 KATHMANDU 000656

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [NP](#)

SUBJECT: NEPAL: MAOISTS ON MEDIA OVERKILL; GOVERNMENT
KEEPING OWN COUNSEL

REF: A. (A) KATHMANDU 0572

[1](#)B. (B) KATHMANDU 0620

[1](#)C. (C) KATHMANDU 0643

Classified By: AMB. MICHAEL E.MALINOWSKI. REASON: 1.5 (B,D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Since his emergence from under ground nearly two weeks ago, Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai has dominated the headlines and airwaves of the Nepali media. The Maoists have used the opportunity to criticize the Government of Nepal (GON) and the political parties for ineptitude; to emphasize repeatedly their call for a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution; to accuse the GON of deliberately stalling the peace process; and to alter and increase their demands. In contrast, the GON has been uncharacteristically quiet, allowing the Maoists to occupy center stage virtually unchallenged, at least for now. The GON's strategy of drawing out the peace process for as long as possible may work up to a point. There is some risk, however, that it may delay too long and squander the momentum it has worked hard to develop. The Maoist monologue in the media makes the political parties, already complaining of being sidelined and ignored by the Palace, appear increasingly superfluous. The Indian Ambassador reports that the Maoists, still armed, are using the threat of violence to extort and to enforce participation at political rallies in the countryside. End summary.

BABURAM BLITZKRIEG

[1](#)2. (SBU) Since his first public appearance at a Maoist-staged press conference in Kathmandu on March 29 (Ref A), revolutionary ideologue Baburam Bhattarai has become a media staple, dominating the front pages and airwaves of both the government-owned and independent news agencies nearly non-stop for almost two weeks. Besides appearing at press conferences, award ceremonies, and rallies, the heretofore shadowy leader has been photographed meeting--and shaking hands--with heads of the major political parties. These meetings span the political spectrum, including the Maoists' ideological rival Madhav Nepal, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal - United Marxist Leninist (UML), as well as the aristocratic President of the right-wing, pro-Palace National Democratic Party, Pashupati SJB Rana. Following their large public rally in Kathmandu on April 3 (Ref B), Bhattarai and other members of the Maoist negotiating team took their individual shows on the road, with each hosting a "mass gathering" in five separate locations on April 7: Bhattarai in far-western Nepalgunj; military commander Ram Bahadur "Badal" Thapa in south-central Chitwan; Krishna Mahara in southern Rupandehi; Matrika Yadav in southeastern Rautahat; and Dev Gurung in north-central Pokhara.

CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY,
PRE-DIALOGUE DEMANDS DOMINATE

[1](#)3. (SBU) Bhattarai and his colleagues have used their new public podiums to underscore certain recurrent themes. First, they assure their listeners that they are serious about dialogue this time, their willingness to come to the table impelled by the "strategic balance" between Government of Nepal (GON) forces and their own. Second, they emphasize (and re-emphasize) throughout their remarks that a constituent assembly aimed at drafting an entirely new constitution is the only way out of the current impasse. The present constitution is dead, they assert (responsibility for that death is variously assigned to the Palace or the political parties, depending upon the audience); a new one must thus be written from scratch. They generally decline to be drawn into any discussion of the mechanics of how a constituent assembly would operate or what specific parts of the current constitution must be changed, other than to suggest the absence of any "unalterable elements." (Note:

Most observers interpret this as a direct reference to the monarchy and multi-party democracy, both of which are stipulated in the "unalterable" preamble to the current constitution. End note.) Third, they accuse the GON of obstructing dialogue by delaying the formation of its negotiating team and by refusing to meet the Maoists' more recent demands, including the release of five prominent Central Committee members still in GON detention. Fourth, they threaten a return to violence if the peace initiative fails. Other subsidiary themes frequently surface as well, including appeals to the international community to meet Maoist negotiators and to support their call for a constituent assembly (often coupled with the contradictory demand that foreign powers not interfere in the peace process). Another consistent call is for armed Maoist cadres to be absorbed into a new national army (the name of which, of course, should then be changed from the Royal Nepal Army to the People's Army) placed under the control of "the people."

14. (SBU) On the few occasions when the five Maoist negotiators have discussed their thinking in detail, contradictory statements inevitably emerge. For example, Krishna Mahara told a gathering of prominent local businessmen that the Maoists do not oppose a market economy. A few days later, Dev Gurung gave another group a diametrically different interpretation of Maoist ideology, concluding that the Maoists, if in power, would indeed oppose a market economy and nationalize the nation's means of production. A few days subsequently, Baburam Bhattarai, in an apparent effort to explain the contradiction (or perhaps to confuse his bewildered audience still further) offered the opaque pronouncement that the Maoists differentiate between "nationalist" and "anti-nationalist" capitalists, favoring the former and opposing the latter. (Note: Many observers interpreted "anti-nationalist" as a thinly veiled threat against the influential Indian Marwari business community here. End note.)

GOVERNMENT COMPARATIVELY QUIET

15. (SBU) Throughout the Maoists' media blitz, the GON has been comparatively quiet, as if intentionally ceding center stage to the insurgents. With the exception of the King's public address in the far west on April 4 (Ref C), the GON appears to have made little effort to counter the insurgents' public relations campaign. When GON representatives do speak publicly, their remarks and actions seem only to reinforce Maoist claims. On March 30 Narayan Singh Pun, Minister for Physical Planning and GON-appointed negotiator, conceded publicly the Maoist argument that there are "two state powers" in Nepal and averred that there is "a balance of power between the government and the Maoists." The Maoists are not terrorists, Pun further elaborated, because terrorists have "no political base, whereas the Maoists were supported by a huge mass of people." The following day, Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand shared the dais with Baburam Bhattarai at a press function, wherein the event sponsor referred to Bhattarai as an "alternate prime minister" and Chand was photographed grinning and pumping the hand of the Maoist second-in-command (Ref C). (Note: The PM was apparently not forewarned that Bhattarai would be there and was reportedly furious for being blind-sided. End note.) Not until one week later, on April 6, did Minister Pun pose any objection to the barrage of Maoist accusations and demands, noting that the GON "may not" accede to the insurgents' call to release Maoist detainees as a pre-condition to dialogue.

16. (C) Sources close to the Palace have told us that the GON strategy for now is to spin out the pre-dialogue phase for as long as possible. The GON believes that time is on its side, and that every day of peace under the ceasefire increases popular distaste for a return to violence and thus erodes support for the Maoists. The strategy is to eschew engaging in lengthy, contentious public debates with the Maoists about their particular issues--from the constituent assembly to integrating the People's Army--and focus instead on broad-brush humanitarian and social matters likely to gain public sympathy. Hence the GON delay in naming members to its negotiating team, let alone discussing possible agenda items for eventual talks. One GON source, elucidating this strategy, indicated that by giving the Maoists free rein to expound their doctrine in the media, the GON hopes to expose to the public the shallowness and hypocrisy of the insurgents' ideology. There is also an expectation in government and media quarters that the sustained limelight will strip away the Maoists' mystique as secretive revolutionaries and reveal them, like other party leaders, as self-serving politicians.

ARMY REACTION

17. (C) While the GON is keeping its own counsel for now, the leadership of the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) is privately letting its dissatisfaction with the situation be known. On April 7, Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen. Pyar Jung Thapa complained to the Ambassador that the RNA had agreed only to a ceasefire--not to carte blanche for the Maoists to travel all over the country and hold mass meetings. He also expressed dismay at the number of Maoist prisoners that have been released since the ceasefire. (Note: The total number of prisoners released thus far is unclear. The Home Ministry has estimated that 100 detainees have been set free but is awaiting data from the districts to finalize the tally. A source at the Supreme Court estimated the total to be 200. End note.) In the meantime, Thapa said that the RNA is using the ceasefire to recruit and retrain.

18. (C) National Security Council member Maj. Gen. Rookmangud Katuwal expressed concern that Maoists in the far west are exploiting the ceasefire to increase their strength. Now that the security forces have reduced their patrols, the insurgents can intimidate and extort money from the local population at will, Katuwal charged. The insurgents have busily been organizing multiple mass meetings to broadcast their ideology, as permitted now under the ceasefire, while the mainstream political parties, whether through fear, inertia, or both, have been idle. The Maoists are filling the vacuum left by the legitimate political parties at the local level, Katuwal worried.

POLITICAL PARTIES:
ON THE SIDELINES AGAIN

19. (SBU) It is not only at the local level, however, that the insurgents are crowding the mainstream political parties out of the public arena. The Maoist media frenzy has pushed the political parties, already worried that the King's appointment of an interim government has rendered them inconsequential, even further onto the sidelines. Bhattarai followed up his initial meetings with the party leaders by blasting them in print for their mismanagement of democracy over the past 12 years. In his April 3 public rally in the capital, Bhattarai belittled them as "dinosaurs" incapable of changing with the times. Despite their lack of support for a constituent assembly, leaders of the major parties have not offered a well-reasoned rebuttal to the proposal or a defense of the constitution under which all of them have served as Prime Ministers or Members of Parliament. Nor have they proposed other issues from their own parties' agendas (i.e., equal rights for women, land reform, international relations) to be included as topics for GON/Maoist dialogue in the future. What little press time leaders of the two largest parties can garner these days is, for the most part, spent criticizing both the King and the Maoists for excluding them from dialogue without, however, offering any suggestions of what they would contribute.

110. (C) Some of the parties' inactivity may be due in part to continued Maoist intimidation at the local level. The Indian Ambassador reports that Gurkha Welfare Officers spread across the country have found that the Maoists, still armed, are using the threat of violence to extract financial "contributions" and enforce participation at political rallies. The insincerity of Maoist claims to support democracy, he asserts, is proven by their intolerance of political competition in the countryside.

COMMENT

111. (C) Despite the Maoists' public prolixity over the past two weeks, they seem determined not to be drawn into the specifics of any of their proposals or to describe what a Maoist-led government might look like. For now, they are keeping their agenda intentionally vague and their pronouncements purposely elliptical so as to confuse and divide even further their politically factionalized audiences. To a certain degree, their strategy may be working. Despite the lack of popular enthusiasm for the proposed constituent assembly, the political parties and members of civil society are spending most of their time arguing among themselves about what the Maoist proposals entail, instead of uniting in a well-reasoned defense of the current constitution or of multi-party democracy. The political parties' performance thus far has been particularly disappointing. At this crucial watershed in Nepal's democratic history, they are focusing all of their energies on complaining about the interim government and reiterating their refusal to work with it, thereby cutting themselves out of any role in shaping the agenda for dialogue with the Maoists. The party leaders' paralysis in the capital could cost them dearly at the local level, leaving the Maoists to fill the vacuum.

12. (C) Comment continued: Throughout the Maoists' media blitz lies one consistent subtext: that the insurgents represent a legitimate political and military "force" on a par with the GON and entitled to the same status and recognition. Their efforts to be photographed meeting GON and political leaders and their outreach to the international community are clearly intended to reinforce that message. The GON, on the other hand, apparently is hoping that the Maoists will talk themselves out, wearying the public with their empty rhetoric and ultimately revealing the hollowness of their proposals. The Government reasons that prolonging the ceasefire will build up an internal momentum and popular expectations of peace that will make it exceedingly difficult for the Maoists to mobilize their rank-and-file for a return to violence. That strategy may be a sound one up to a point. If the RNA is using the ceasefire to retrain and recruit, it can be safely assumed that the Maoists are doing the same. The danger remains that the GON may overplay its hand, stalling a bit too long and squandering the momentum toward negotiations it has worked hard to develop.

MALINOWSKI